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## Parks stems floodwater's tide

To make a point, the timing couldn't be better: Headwaters Park prepares for the event it has become most associated with at the same time it flirts with the floodwaters it was built to accommodate.

Festivals or floods, Headwaters is the poster park for preserving green space. Those who dismiss park development efforts as impractical and costly take note: Fort Wayne's parks are the most effective and most economical flood-control efforts the city has ever implemented.

The \$53 million system of levees and dikes built in response to the devastating flood of 1982 are at the other end of the flood-control spectrum. The 10-mile system of earthen levees and concrete walls was designed to contain the St. Marys, St. Joseph and Maumee rivers near their convergence. In terms of protecting the neighborhoods threatened 21 years ago, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-designed project seems to have worked in its first real test.

But some residents upstream from the levees, in Decatur and in the southside Fort Wayne neighborhoods bordering the St. Marys, have suggested that the engineering project is responsible for backing up the water flow and causing their flooding problems.

Christopher Crow, an assistant professor of geology at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, said it's downstream where the levee system would create trouble.

"Unless it was a whopping huge flood-control dam, I can't think of a situation where doing some river engineering would impact the area upstream," Crow said. "What you do with a levee is make the river's cross-sectional area greater, so you basically are storing and transporting more water. I think Decatur just got unlucky."

As frustrating as it might be for the property owners, the reality is that the situation could have been much worse without the simplest of flood-control efforts - the city's parks systems.

Foster Park, Swinney Park, Lawton Park, Headwaters and small neighborhood parks such as Indian Village and Rockhill served an invaluable service last week as storage ground for rainwater that had nowhere else to go. Much of Fort Wayne is in a floodplain, and preserving the areas most likely to flood as park land makes great sense.

Julie Donnell, president of Friends of the Parks, said flood control was a consideration for the

designers of Fort Wayne's park system. Kansas City landscape architect George Kessler, in creating a park and boulevard system in the early 1900s, acknowledged the influence of the rivers in that design.

"They knew the area would flood," Donnell said. "The original plan was to develop a park where the city's water treatment plant is, but a mayor commandeered the site."

The mistake wasn't repeated when the state urged development of Headwaters Park as a flood-control project after the '82 flood. Recognizing that no amount of structural engineering would protect the thumb-shaped bend of the St. Marys off North Clinton Street, commercial properties were bought out, and the land was wisely preserved as a park.

It's a model that Bluffton Mayor Ted Ellis wisely hopes to follow with about a dozen properties on the town's northeast side. Where the waters of the Wabash River inevitably rise is no place for a neighborhood.

"About every spring, or at least every second year, their basements flood," Ellis said. "This seems like a good time to buy the properties. We could do just a few things to make it into a park - it's near our greenway - and for 51 weeks out of the year, that's how we would use it, and for one week out of the year, it might be flooded."

Ellis said he'll discuss the plan with officials when he makes a trip to Washington this week in search of clean-up assistance. The Upper Wabash River Basin Commission was just recently organized, but Ellis said he hopes the organization will have the authority and financial resources to assist in a buyout project.

The Maumee River Basin Commission has bought out about 70 flood-prone parcels in Fort Wayne, Decatur, Auburn and Hamilton, including the Headwaters Park property. Buying the land and prohibiting development there ensures that taxpayers won't continue to provide disaster assistance, that insurance rates won't be affected by flood-damage claims.

Developers might grumble at the prospect of tax dollars being used to buy up prime riverfront property. But taxpayers and public officials should recognize the wisdom in doing so. A new school of thought in land-use and planning recognizes sustainability - the philosophy that environmental stewardship and economic development are inseparable.

As last week's events remind us, development that recognizes the role of water in our environment makes a lot more sense than development that attempts to overcome it. That philosophy was apparent to early park planners, and it should be apparent to public officials as they respond to the latest floods.